

# Claudia Incarnata...Part VII

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*Claudia comes closer to unravelling the mystery of Tintamare.*

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At last methought that I had wander'd far  
In an old wood; fresh washed in coolest dew,  
The maiden splendours of the morning star  
Shook in the steadfast blue. - Tennyson.

Like the delicate notes that open a violin sonata; each element of the morning combined before her eyes to form a beautiful picture. It was a marvelous tableau of sound, of light, of aroma and of timeless essence. Claudia especially delighted in the caress of the sea breeze upon her face as the first rays of dawn emerged from the cool of the night. The rich scent of freshly brewed espresso now made her mouth water and she took a generous sip; enjoying the refreshingly bitter tang. It was Saturday. The previous night's fearful storm had passed and although she had slept little, she felt strangely serene and alert. She clicked the inbox on her laptop for the third time in an hour and again read – no new messages. There was still no word from Sabina in Switzerland and she resisted the temptation to send her another e-mail asking for news. The news might be bad after all; her cancer may have got worse or there may just be no news at all, no change in her condition. Her thoughts then turned to the events of the previous night. She could not shift the lurid image of the entity from her mind's eye and most of all, the pathetic defensive gesture it had made when she had threatened it with the bayonet. She took another sip of coffee. A part of her felt like an oppressor and she knew intuitively that she had done the wrong thing or grossly misunderstood the creature's peculiar mode of communication. The fact that it had fled before her and jumped into the sea indicated that it was vulnerable; indeed that it was afraid of her; more afraid of her than of the storm racked deep. She reached for a box that for the past few weeks she had kept by her bedside. It contained all the objects that the entity had given her; a two thousand five hundred year old bronze coin from ancient Akragas – worth about 150 euros according to several on-line auctions that she had followed. Next was the Roman amphora handle from the second century A.D. "Ok, so you have been here a long time...centuries." The next object she picked up was the iridescent beetle; dead but still beautifully green and bright. The light fell immediately on its surfaces, changing and shifting to produce tones of indigo, violet and viridian. The gorgeous little insect was more of a mystery. "Maybe...maybe you are very, very different to me...I just don't know." Finally she picked up the passion flower. It had wilted and shriveled and she remembered how fresh it had been when she first found it; as though it had been picked minutes

before. “Passiflora incarnata ...at least that was more obvious. Was it a joke, a pun on her name or a comment on her passionate nature?” She shook her head and closed the box. The painting of Eleanora and the twisted orange tree were also part of the mystery. The tree obviously held some significance for the entity; it had cared for it and watered it. Moreover her grandmother Eleanora had lived in the house happily for many years, guarding the secrets of Tintamare; secrets that she had probably taken with her to the grave. “Speak to me Nanna, why did you leave this house to me? Did you think I was the only one who could handle it?” Her phone rang. “Pronto.” “Claudia it is Virgilio Barricelli, bon giouno, did you sleep well despite the storm?” “Oh yes Professore, just fine. My poor old house was not swept into the sea.” “Good, good. I was hoping that you would join us at the Accademia for a rehearsal this morning....Claudia?” “Yes, I’m sorry. I was just thinking. I really have nothing to do today. I’d love to.” “Buono, we start at 10.” “What are you rehearsing?” “Italian baroque arias.” “Good. Have you heard anything from Sabina?” Barricelli hesitated. “No, I’m sorry. I’m sure she will contact us soon. Until then we must wait and hope.” “Yes ok. Well, I’ll see you at 10.” “Oh, and we will be serving antipasti, dolce and coffee afterwards.” Claudia smiled, that’s what I love about Italy.” “That sounds great.” “Ciao.” “Ciao Professore.” \*\*\*\*\* Claudia arrived in Agrigento at exactly 9:30 after having had a quick breakfast of figs, ricotta and ciabatta... have to soak up some of the coffee, she though, while going over the events of the previous night yet again . She made her way through the old city’s narrow, winding streets and steep alleyways to park outside the Aroma Café. She glanced through the windows to see the brothers busily cleaning after the end of the breakfast rush. On the far wall, next to the autographed portrait of Luciano Pavarotti, hung her own; smiling cheekily and looking every bit the Australian supermodel that the brothers had mistaken her for. She considered paying them a visit later that afternoon for a lemon gelato. “That’ll make their day.” She crossed the quiet Via Atena and turned down one of the narrow alleys that ran off it. Immediately she noticed a profusion of antique wrought iron balconies from which hung long lines of drying linen. She also noticed the cool shade of the alley; a welcome relief from the ever present Sicilian sun. On a set of black marble steps, a pair of yellow cats flirted lazily but paused their affectionate antics long enough to watch her pass by. It was an alley like countless others in Italy but it contained a special place that set it quite apart. Any casual visitor would have noticed the profusion of ‘Vespas’; of all makes and colours parked near a huge black iron door. She now stood in front of this door and glanced at the immaculately polished brass plaque beside it. L’Accademia di Santa Cecilia di Agrigento. She rang the bell and soon heard the pleasant voice of Julia Barricelli. “Ah Claudia, bon giorno, benvenuta, come in.” “Grazi.” The lock clicked and she pushed the massive door open with some effort. It was a megalithic portal with good reason, for the house to which it afforded entry was nothing short of a palazzo. She emerged from the atrium into the beautiful cloistered courtyard garden. She saw the sinuous, sensual lines and imposing grandeur of the Fountain of The Graces and paused to look at the lush profusion of perfect flowers that grew by the stately Renaissance style colonnades. “Ah, so wonderful, like a palace from a fable by Boccaccio.” On this particular day the garden was bustling with activity. Students and staff; most carrying some item relating to music, were hurriedly ferrying their burdens from the garden up the broad main stairwell.

She saw long, slender Baroque trumpets, cellos, drums and a huge double bass as well as every kind of stringed or woodwind instrument. She was impressed by the amount of activity around her as well as by the sheer energy and enthusiasm of all involved. She was reminded of accounts that she had read of the Venetian Arsenale during times of war. She could easily imagine Barricelli as a 16th century Venetian admiral marshalling his troops and steering his galley into war against the Barbary corsairs. Now, amongst the general chorus of chatter, she heard several reverent mentions of Il Professore and smiled; Barricelli certainly knew how to motivate people but there was more to it than that. His students felt a deep, abiding love and respect for him.. She noticed a few of the players that had taken part in the last concert and they did not fail to notice her; greeting her warmly with, "Bon giorno signorina." Or "Signorina Incarnata benvenuta." To which she graciously replied, "Grazi, grazzi mille." She now saw Julia standing at the foot of the stairs. As soon as they made eye contact Julia beamed excitedly. "Claudia, thank you for coming. My grandfather is upstairs preparing for the rehearsal. He sends his apologies." "Oh that all right, how kind of him to invite me." "Not at all Claudia. You know you are always welcome here." "This place is so big but I'm sure I'll find my way around one day. "Yes it was built during the settecento, the 16th century and we are still finding rooms and corridors that we didn't know about. Claudia found this remark a little unsettling and did not reply, although she realized Julia had meant it as a joke. Julia led her up the broad stairs through the steady stream of students and staff. She caught a few passing comments of "bella" and "bellissima" but ignored them with a sly smile. As they ascended the stairs Julia's cell phone rang. She glanced at Claudia apologetically and stopped to answer it. She took a couple of paces and turned. Claudia listened to some of the ensuing conversation but was soon lost amongst Julia's rapid Italian. She then noticed a tall young man walking up the stairs. Conspicuously, he carried no instruments, just a discreet sheaf of music in a blue folder. Her eyes lingered on his face; dark, sharp featured, aesthetic, lean, with shoulder length dark hair swept back carelessly. His expression was serious, troubled even and his restless dark eyes searched the steps from time to time as he ascended, like he was looking for some long - lost keepsake. He wore a light purple shirt, black vest and a dark gold tie, giving the impression of casual and refined elegance. Claudia took a tentative step back and rested her shoulders against the wall. It was then that the man saw her. It may be that from his perspective she looked like she was about to stumble or he may have been acting upon some impulse. Claudia had certainly become accustomed to impulsive male behaviour over the years. She decided upon the former as he now reached the landing upon which she stood. He looked at Julia who raised a hand in greeting and continued her conversation. He then smiled briefly at Claudia and Claudia reciprocated, following him with her eyes as he passed. At the next landing he paused, discreetly looked back at Claudia and found her still looking at him. With satisfaction, she noted the momentary confusion upon his face. She smiled again slyly, and then he was gone. Come unto me thou troubled soul, her inner voice said. "Ok, ciao!" A full two minutes later, with the conversation over, Julia breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm so sorry about that. It's chaos here on days like this and I have to see to just about everything." "That's all right." Momentarily she hoped that Julia would tell her who the young man was but instead she continued on her way up the stairs with

renewed purpose and urgency. Claudia followed Julia up three floors to a landing that opened out onto the spacious roof of the building. At some point in the past the roof had been tiled with beautiful multicoloured tiles in the Moorish style and part of it was covered by a high pergola upon which grape vines had been trained. There were folding seats and a circular central area on either side of which the orchestra were now assembling. Their noisy bonhomie was infectious and Claudia found herself wishing once again that she too was a student here. The rooftop concert space offered a spectacular view of Agrigento's medieval streets with the ruins of ancient Akragas clearly visible to the south. The golden sandstone of those distant temples glowed in the dazzling rays of the morning sun like so many blocks of honeycomb standing timeless and serene in the pure Mediterranean light. Was this the world that the entity remembered, Claudia wondered; the two and half thousand year old glories of Classical Akragas? Some lines from an ancient poem surfaced in her mind, Nothing is sweeter than love, All other bliss comes second And compared to it, Even honey is too bitter To hold in my mouth. "Would you like a drink?" Claudia's reverie was cut short and she turned to look at Julia's smiling face. "Oh no, thank you, I'm fine." "You know, my grandfather loves rehearsing up here. He loves conducting under the open sky and there is that added element of drama with the ruins in the distance. We always gather quite an audience too – look." She pointed to the wall of buildings opposite. On several balconies; some of them seemingly too small to accommodate more than two people at a squeeze, chairs had been placed. These were soon occupied by a steadily growing collection of elderly people. Without exception these pensionati were clad in slippers and dressing gowns, old suits and ties; attire that might have been considered flamboyant or elegant fifty years ago. "They love this and my grandfather father enjoys performing for them." Claudia smiled and tried to imagine her grandmother nestled amongst the time-worn old faces. She too would have loved the sheer folly and exuberance of music under the glorious dome of the Sicilian sky. Julia led Claudia to her seat and sat beside her. Claudia breathed a relaxed sigh, "Oh, it's so beautiful up here." "Yes it is; we are so fortunate. The student's fees pay for the use of this wonderful old building." Now Claudia watched as the three kettle drummers and six trumpeters took their positions. Soon the strings and the woodwinds were all assembled and a young man with shoulder length brown hair took his seat at the harpsichord. Claudia smiled and shifted in her seat as she recognized the man from the stairs. A minute later she blushed slightly as Julia pointed him out to her, "That is my cousin Aurelio, remember, we met him briefly on the stairs. He's just arrived home from Trieste." Claudia was about to reply when a hush descended on the players. From the direction of the stairs Barricelli appeared looking immaculate in a pair of canvas trousers, a salmon pink shirt with a royal blue cravat. He held a large open folio as he walked and indicated points of importance in it while peering over golden half-rimmed spectacles. Beside him and a good thirty centimeters taller than him, strode the gloriously beautiful Gianina Strozzi. As usual Strozzi listened to Barricelli's every word with undivided attention. She often stooped to catch a particular point or to seek clarification from the maestro while the whole time, the breeze played impetuously with her flame red hair. Claudia noticed that several of the men in the orchestra turned to smile and look at her. "Is she not divine," breathed Julia. Claudia nodded and hummed in agreement without taking her own eyes off the svelte form of the nineteen

year old soprano. She was dressed simply in jeans and a snug black tee shirt upon which was printed an enlarged facsimile of Johann Sebastian Bach's signature. But what particularly caught Claudia's attention were Strozzi's boots. To complete an already alluring ensemble, she wore a pair of shiny black, extensively laced Doc Martin's. To Claudia's mind, they certainly lent her something of a 'bad girl' look; more akin to a rock starlet than a classically trained soprano. She found herself slowly licking her lips. "You must come out with us one night Claudia." "Out with...?" "With Gianina and I. We can have a few drinks and maybe go to some clubs. Would you like that?" An enticing image of the three of them dancing to some hard techno blazed into Claudia's mind for an instant. But almost immediately she realized that there was someone missing from the tableau and she quickly dismissed it from her thoughts. "Yes, indeed," she said quietly. "Great. Gianina and I have been good friends since we were kids," then she added with a giggle, "And I have to drag her away from my grandfather's instruction once in a while." "Oh, ok." Barricelli now left Strozzi to study the folio on her own and went to talk with his trumpeters and kettle drummers. Their expressions and body language as he approached them made Claudia smile; conversing with the maestro was a matter no little importance. "It must be wonderful studying here," she said absently. "Oh yes, but its hard work too. My grandfather is a member of the Societa Italiana di Musicologia and expects nothing but perfection. If he praises you, then and only then do you know you're good." Claudia thought once again about the CD that she had sent Barricelli, containing recordings from her phone of the entity playing Eleanora's harpsichord. He had greatly admired the entity's playing, calling the player a master, a virtuoso. Ah, what to make of it all...! And I have Sabina, possibly dying right now, far away in Lausanne... From his back pocket the professore now produced a tightly rolled sheet of music. The appearance of this object had an immediate effect on the performers; as though it was some magical talisman. Silence descended as Barricelli took his position before the strings. Alone now in the central space, Strozzi looked somehow abandoned and vulnerable. Her eyes were downcast in the expectant silence and remained there until with a stroke, Barricelli brought his orchestral forces triumphantly to life. All at once; trumpets, drums, woodwinds and strings poured out their frenzied power; creating a startling and multi layered aurora of sound. Claudia listened in astonishment as the gathering reverberation intensified around Strozzi. The young soprano stood solemnly in her place as though she was stranded powerless at the epicenter of an earthquake. But after three minutes, as the tumult of drums, winds and brass subsided, her moment arrived. She sang just three words; *Io parto vincitor*, before the trumpets and drums returned like baying hounds. This time though they were hounds in her service and stayed subordinate to her throughout the rest of the aria. And what a performance she gave! Like the goddess Diana implacably hunting down the hapless Actaeon, she unleashed all the force and fury of divine vengeance but did so with commanding elegance, with regal dignity and composure. *Io parto vincitor ... Victorious, I depart!* The first thing that Claudia slowly became conscious of, as the final notes of the aria died away, was cool air on her tongue. She closed her mouth then jerked her head to the left slightly. From amongst the assembled pensionati someone shouted, "Viva Italia!" Next to her, Julia laughed quietly, as did several others, then the audience burst into rapturous applause. \* \* \* \* \* Two hours later she padded quietly along the carpeted,

wood paneled corridor. It was hung with old engravings and dark 18 th century portraits, the disapproving eyes of which seemed to follow her as she passed. Feeling like she was a minor character in an Agatha Christie novel, she quickly scanned the doors on either side. Most of them were blank but she eventually reached one that carried an enamel name plate which read: Dottore Aurello Barricelli After having said her goodbyes to Julia and the professor at the close of the rehearsal, she had made her way to the front desk. Fortunately it was unattended and she found there a mail directory which gave her the location of Aurelio Barricelli's office. Aurelio had left once the rehearsal was concluded and she watched him depart with more than casual interest. A plan had then formed in her mind. Now that she was actually standing in front of his door it seemed more of a gamble than a plan, but what was the old saying?... Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Holding her breath, she tapped on it firmly. "Entrare." She pushed the door open slowly and prepared herself for Aurello's reaction upon seeing her. He stood at the door holding a sheet of music. He had loosened his tie and she spied a few dark hairs curling around the edges of the coolly hued fabric just below his neck. "Posso aiutarla?" he asked quietly.... "Can I help you?" Now Claudia raised herself to her full height, she inclined her head and drew back her shoulders. She did this so naturally, so subtly, that she might have been some rare and beautiful forest orchid coming into bloom. In answer to his question she fixed her eyes upon his and nodded slowly. She shut the door quietly behind her and briefly scanned the room. They were alone. She looked at his face again and Aurello met her gaze but saw such terrible, disquieting beauty before him that he quickly averted his eyes to take in her form instead. She advanced upon him inexorably, reaching for his throat then encircling the back of his head with her hands. Their lips met and she drank in the honeyed, musky aroma of his skin. She felt his reluctance too but ignored it, concentrating on smothering his lips with her own. There had always been something predatory about her; it was in her nature and she knew it well. Now her primal self came into its ascendancy. She ran her nails down his sides and slowly led him back into the room. Without moving away from him, she stopped and briefly took in her surroundings. They were in a long, narrow, elegantly furnished room. Claudia immediately appreciated the cool, softly lit interior which gave the room an air of snug seclusion. At the far end, a curtained window probably looked out onto the courtyard of the Accademia but by this time Claudia had lost whatever sense of orientation she had gained on her previous visits. By the window stood a large, lightly tinted harpsichord and, by the look of it, Claudia guessed that it was a modern reproduction. Next to it was a dark antique desk strewn with books, sheet music and an assortment of writing implements. Claudia glanced again at Aurelio's face and answered his concerned expression with a sweetly reassuring smile. Oh Claudia, what would Il Professore say...? She reached down with both hands and hitched up her skirt. Hooking her panties with her thumbs at the hips, she slowly slid them down, then looked up immediately to savour the look on Aurelio's face. To call him awestruck would have been an indefensible understatement. She smiled slyly and turned her attention to his mouth. Aurelio reached up and rested his hands on her hips. She responded by kissing him with increasing passion. After a few long minutes she reached down and found his belt buckle. In two deft moves she had unfastened it and she confidently allowed her hands to delve deeper. As she did so, she heard him sigh and she

pulled back to see a dreamy expression writ large upon his face. He leaned back as she glanced down then met his eyes with a look of incendiary desire. She smiled; not breaking eye contact for even an instant, then quickly dragged down his boxers, removed his shoes and trousers. Aurelio's cock lay thick and semi erect against his thigh. She wasted no time in grasping it and slowly flicking back the loose foreskin. In her dexterous hand it soon achieved a satisfying state of hardness. What is more, its curved shaft had her immediately imagining it deep in the warm embrace of her pussy. Aurelio's hand gently pulled her hair aside and she shut her eyes. The head of his cock soon slipped deliciously past her lips and with her hand she pressed the length of his shaft against her tongue and the inside of her cheek. Gradually she became accustomed to the feeling of his cock in her mouth and began to work on it in earnest. His sighs and the rocking motion of his hips indicated his tacit approval so she shifted to a slowly accelerating rhythm; using lips, cheeks, hand and tongue to marvelous effect. The mere sensation of a hard, thick cock in her mouth; hers to enjoy, was enough to make Claudia wet. She had experienced this time and again in the past. Now her pussy, true to form, began to drip with sweetness like the golden honey comb that she always imagined it was. She shifted her head to the side and ran her tongue hard up the entire length of Aurelio's shaft. His balls were rigid and retracted and a pool of her saliva had already collected on his desk between his thighs. She gripped the base of his shaft hard and concentrated her efforts on the head of his cock; sucking, licking and tickling its entire surface with her dripping tongue. Satisfied with her efforts, she stood up and took him by the hands. She slowly switched places with him and settled back on the desk. Surrounded as she was by sheet music, books and writing implements, there was little space. Now she smiled at the mildly bemused look on his face as she spread her legs. She felt the room's refreshingly cool air on the lips of her labia as she spread them. Aurelio looked at her pussy in amazement and she wiggled her hips encouragingly. Soon his lips and tongue were feasting on Claudia's succulent slit. It had been tingling from right about the time she had conceived this little plan. Now, like a caged beast it hungered for release. Aurelio had a skilled tongue and as he grew accustomed to the task, his reluctance faded and his desire asserted itself. He savoured each and every one of Claudia's folds, returning often to lick and tickle her clit. Soon she was bucking and grinding her pussy into his face as his fingers spread her slit wider and wider. She became delirious with the mounting pleasure caused by his unrelenting mouth and lost herself in the room's ornate Baroque ceiling for a while then shut her eyes; imagining lurid and lusty scenes such as had always adorned her dreams. The figure of the entity appeared in her mind's eye for a fleeting instant to be replaced by some lines of Swinburne's, O red-lipped mouth of marsh-flower, I have a secret halved with thee. The name that is love's name to me Thou knowest, and the face of her Who is my festival to see. When she came, it was in torrents of sheer delight. She cried out and gripped Aurelio's long hair then pressed his head down onto her flaming nub. He didn't seem to mind and continued licking her clit up and down with broad strokes of his tongue. She bucked up against his chin as the long sea waves of sensation peaked and faded; one after another until she lay still and sated upon Aurelio's ornate desk. He emerged from between her legs with an endearingly wet chin and smiled. "Grazi dottore." Before he could reply Claudia slipped from the desk and onto the floor with lynx-like agility.

Amazingly, Aurelio's cock was still erect; he had obviously relished his task. Now she wrapped her lips around it, pumping the base of his shaft and feeling his balls react to her pressure. It took her no time at all to make its entire length glisten with her saliva. After a few minutes she tasted his pre-come and concentrated on milking more of it from the swollen head of his cock. She then felt him tense his hips and she stood up. One glance; her most seductive, and she lay on the floor. With one fluid movement he knelt down and slipped his cock deep into her still wet slit. Claudia wrapped her exquisite legs around him and arched her back; taking as much of his cock as she could. This was her moment, her most adored treasure, that instant of transfiguration when she became a predator of the night, a hunter of the primeval forest that is desire. Aurelio too now brought all of his strength to the wonderful task before him; fucking her with long slow strokes until he felt her returning his each thrust with equal force. He then increased his pace, summoning his every reserve of strength and self control. He tried not to look at her face for he found her beauty strangely unsettling, her skin had about it the aroma of the sea or of a balmy breeze, he could not decide which, but it too was totally intoxicating. Every inch of her body was sheer perfection to his eyes; she glowed with a transcendent aura the like of which he had never encountered in any other woman. Now she rolled him onto his back and sat up. Looking down at him with cascades of black hair framing her faultless face, she grinned, telling him that the best was yet to come. His cock felt so deliciously firm inside her that she didn't want to waste another second. She rocked back and forth, feeling Aurelio's shaft slide against the wet walls of her pussy then she bucked up and down, slowly at first, then, with increasing tempo until her hair bounced rapidly against her back and shoulders. She looked down at him with fierce lust in her eyes; imagining that she rode the waves of a storm raked sea. Aurelio rubbed his palms up and down her sides; relishing the torrent of sensation that this woman whose name he did not know, was bringing to bear upon his body. At the epicenter of it all was his cock, buried deep in the luxurious embrace of her pussy. With every downward thrust that Claudia made Aurelio thrust up into her and so they set a powerful rhythm. With his hands he gripped her hips to pull her down against him while he focused once more upon her face. Her eyes were shut but they seemed to be watching his every change of expression. Then she opened them and raised her arm as though she was riding a thoroughbred Lipizzaner. Aurelio was overwhelmed; he thrust his cock into her mystic depths again and again until the sweet oblivion of his orgasm washed over him in balmy waves. Claudia stopped and with her pussy skillfully milked his shaft until she had extracted the last drop of come. She caught her breath for a minute then raised her hips. She stood up leaving Aurelio, still with a glistening full erection, seemingly helpless on the floor. He eventually gathered enough strength to prop himself up on his elbows as she collected her panties from where she had discarded them. She gave him one last lingering look at her legs and ass before slipping the panties back on. We will meet again Dottore Aurelio Barricelli and then I'll initiate you into the delights and glories of my ass... She collected her keys and purse and strode towards the door. Putting her hand on the knob she turned back to him, making it seem almost like an afterthought. "Ciao dottore." She lingered long enough to see him nod and smile then she stepped out into the corridor, shutting the door quietly behind her. You've just pulled off the perfect crime Claudia... She strode down the corridor nonchalantly and with as much



grace as she could muster, but before long, she felt a trickle of come ooze down her thigh. As she neared the end of the corridor a thought popped into her head that, at any moment, she might bump into Julia or the Professor. Before she could think of a plausible excuse she heard a sound; faint at first, but steadily growing louder. It sounded like wind chimes; a calming, reassuring sound. She paused and was about to turn her head to see if she could locate the source, when a veil of colour rose up before her eyes. There were many colours; shifting, changing and flowing in a slowly spinning vortex. Her first instinct was to shut her eyes and as she did so the sound of wind chimes grew louder then abruptly ceased. Upon opening her eyes she found herself looking down at the screen of her laptop. She scanned her surroundings rapidly and saw the familiar ambiance of the conservatory at Tintamare. She knelt down and placed her hands on the table upon which the laptop lay. It was a solid reality. She had not put the laptop here before leaving for Agrigento and the table usually stood by the wall with one of Eleanora's large blue Bitossi vases on it. She spotted the vase by the wall – intact. "What the fuck? How the hell did I get here?" Next she turned her attention to the laptop. It was on and connected to the net. She then saw that there was a single unread e-mail waiting for her. An e-mail from Sabina! Hey Claudia, great news, I have had my head scanned by every single machine ever invented, even the one that goes 'ping'. They found nothing – not even a brain LoL! No just kidding, it seems I do have a brain. It's the quality of it that's in question. In short, I'm cured! Thy sent me to another clinic for a second opinion and the results were the same. The tumor is completely gone – and our mysterious friend is to thank. I'm back Friday but in the mean time I've got some shopping to do. I'll bring you back something nice. oxox Sabina. Before taking most of the e-mail's text in, another thought intruded upon her mind and she rushed downstairs into the kitchen. There, just outside the back door, was her car and she breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly she walked back upstairs but not before discarding her keys and purse. A few minutes later she read and reread the e-mail, I'm cured, the tumor is completely gone and our mysterious friend is to thank... Claudia shook her head and whispered. "Damn it Sabina you beautiful bitch, you were right." She stood back from the lap-top, slowly turned around then raised her head and in a quavering voice she said, "Thank you." No sooner had the sound of those two words faded from the room than a swirling grey mass appeared by the far wall. It seemed at first to be composed of tiny, swarming insects. But these rapidly coalesced into a tall rectangular plane. The middle third of surface that now faced her convulsed and undulated for an instant then faded to form an aperture. She peered at it, stunned speechless but fascinated. There was clearly empty space beyond it but it was featureless and lay in shadow. Suddenly she heard herself saying, "A door, it's a door!" Coming Next...The Eighth and Final Chapter of Claudia Incarnata.